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ABSTRACT

A study examined the source of important voter perceptions during the 1984 presidential election and their impact on the choice between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale--specifically perceptions involving the effects of either a Reagan or a Mondale victory on the American economy. The origins of these economic perceptions were sought in communication and political party variables, demographic characteristics, and more general knowledge and beliefs about the economy, which were expected to affect, in turn, candidate preference. First the analysis was conducted for the entire sample; then, given the common assertion that communication variables would be more important in the absence of strong party identification, the analysis was repeated separately for respondents who identified with a political party and for those who identified weakly or not at all. Subjects, 324 randomly selected residents of a southeastern metropolitan area, were asked by telephone which candidate they would vote for if the election were held that day, and, if they expressed a preference, how sure they were about their choice. Findings indicated the continued importance of political party identification--it came close to overwhelming the other variables in the model. As expected, party identification strongly predicted candidate choice, but it also predicted perceptions of economic trends, measured here as economic pessimism. All analyses appeared to provide evidence in favor of an indirect role of the media in influencing candidate preference. (References, figures, and tables of data are included.) (NKA)

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Political Party, Candidate Perceptions, and Media Use as Predictors of Candidate Preference

by

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Political Party, Candidate Perceptions and Media Use As Predictors of Candidate Preference

Models used to predict choice of candidate in presidential elections usually contain three major factors: political party, attitudes toward candidates and attitudes toward issues. Joslyn writes that these three factors are often sufficient to predict 90 percent of the variance in candidate selection (1984, p. 231).

However, party identification is no longer particularly salient to many voters (Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1979; Wattenberg, 1984). No doubt this has contributed to the increased "volatility" that has been observed in American political processes in recent decades (Blumler, 1975; McLeod, Bybee, Luetscher and Garramone, 1978). To try to account for this volatility, the question has become one of identifying the factors that have taken the place of political party affiliation in determining the vote. The argument has been that candidate and issue attitudes, and perhaps other factors, may become relatively more important. Belief systems concerning politics may be organized around factors other than political party and may be reconstituted with each election based on the candidates, issues and context specific to that election.

Given this possiblity, it may be useful to look at elections as a type of public opinion formation process. The understanding of such processes focuses, to a great extent, on the definition of issues. This involves the connotations, associations and attributes that come to be attached to a given issue, the "pictures in our heads" to which Walter Lippmann (1922) referred. Presidential candidates can be conceptualized in the same fashion, which raises the questions about how they come to be "defined" by voting publics.

Chaffee has pointed out that without party identification operating as a perceptual filter and cognitive organizer, people may be more open, or vulnerable, to what Kessel (1980) has called "the informational environment" that surrounds them during a presidential campaign--campaign news coverage, debates, conventions, political advertising, and other sources of information. Chaffee writes, "To learn a candidate's party and cast one's vote accordingly is a simple matter; but to learn his positions on a number of political issues and compare them to the positions of other candidates requires a great deal of communication. The news media provide considerable information associating candidates with issue positions, and this political content is a major factor in determining the votes of attentive audience members who do not identify strongly with either major party" (in Rice and Paisley, 1981, p. 188). It could also be pointed out that such

effects might also occur among the relatively inattentive. It may take little attention to reach the conclusion that a candidate is a "nice guy" or "strong leader."

Among the perceptions that may have become important are candidate issue positions, personality, style and "image," the social, political and economic context of the election, and perceptions concerning the nature of the contest itself, such as the organization, viability and momentum of candidacies.

The role given to media coverage of a campaign is an indirect one, as the source of many, if not most, of these perceptions. (One could argue that the candidates and their staffs are really the sources, but they still depend on the media to carry their messages.) Kessel writes, "The citizen's cognitive structure is the result of all the information that he or she has absorbed and organized, whether from a forgotten civics book read 30 years earlier or a television newscast seen that very day. The citizen's attitudes are linked, in turn, to the vote and other forms of political participation" (1980, p. 175).

The research reported here uses a path analytic approach to attempt to determine both the source of important perceptions during the 1984 presidential election and their impact on the choice between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Specifically, the perceptions involve the effects of either a Reagan or Mondale victory for the

economy. The origins of these economic perceptions is sought in campaign communication variables, political party variables, various demographic characteristics, and more general knowledge and beliefs about the economy. It is expected to affect, in turn, the preference for one or the other of the candidates. The analysis is conducted first for the entire sample. Then, given the common assertion that communication variables will be more important in the absence of strong party identification (Chaffee and Choe, 1980), the analysis is repeated separately for respondents who identify with a political party and for those who identify weakly or not at all.

Economic Perceptions and the Vote

The general model of voter preference to be tested is shown in Figure 1. Economic knowledge--in this case knowledge of the current state of economic indicators--is given an important role in the model. Simple knowledge can be given the role as a conditioner for much of the other conclusions and perceptions that a person might hold. Knowing that budget deficits are high, for example, would lay the groundwork for acceptance or rejection of policy alternatives and might determine the success that candidates' have in setting the campaign agenda.

Figure 1 About Here

In addition, Kessel writes that "the link between campaign strategy and citizen response is information. Broadly speaking, the aim of the entire campaign is to transmit persuasive information to the electorate" (p. 173). In relation to knowledge of the size of deficits or rates of inflation, the issue becomes not the absolute magnitude of such figures, but their interpretation. Is the glass half empty or half full? What do current conditions portend for the future? We may agree that current deficits are too high, but if they were higher last year, we may not rate current deficits as unreasonable, given the expectation that they will continue to fall. An economic pessimism scale, shown in Figure 1, attempts to measure this: what is the general trend in these economic indicators?

The knowledge and pessimism scales, since they are general perceptions of the health of the economic system, are hypothesized to relate to the candidate perceptions. The candidate perceptions relate directly to the campaign and require that the respondent assess the consequences for the economy of a Reagan or Mondale victory. There should be strong relationships between these perceptions and presidential preference, given the importance of economic issues in this, as in most elections.

Communications measures, used here as a set of exogenous variables, are expected to be important in predicting economic knowledge and perhaps economic pessimism as well. And given the importance placed on candidate images and the high profile of economic issues in

the 1984 elections, media measures might be expected to relate to the candidate perceptions as well. Kessel (1980), Nimmo and Savage (1976), Patterson (1980) and Joslyn (1984) have all commented on the importance of the media in creating such images and perceptions. These authors have also noted the vast resources campaign organizations pour into creating and manipulating them.

Political party is arguably still the most important general approach to politics available. Despite its decline, party identification may still create the need to "adjust" the other attitudes in search of cognitive consistency through such processes as selective exposure and perception (Joslyn, 1984; Manheim, 1975). Thus, while it no doubt will relate very strongly to candidate preference, it may also predict the perceptions in the model.

Finally, age, income and education are included because they have consistently been found to be related in a variety of ways to politics and public opinion (Hennessy, 1985).

Method

The research reported here is based on telephone interviews with 324 residents of a southeastern metropolitan area in late October, 1984, conducted by students as a class project. Respondents were obtained through a random selection from the telephone directory, and also through an "add-on" procedure in which a randomly selected one-digit number was added to the last digit of the numbers selected from the phonebook.

The dependent variable, candidate preference, was created out of two questions. Respondents were first asked: "If the election were held today and you could vote, who would you vote for, Walter Mondale or Ronald Reagan?" Those who expressed a preference were then asked how sure they were about the choice, on a three-point scale from very sure to not very sure. The questions were combined to form a seven-point scale, with a score of 1 standing for very sure for Reagan and a 7 standing for very sure for Mondale.

Moving back through the model, the perception of the effects of the outcome of the election on the economy is measured separately for the two candidates. For Reagan the result is a five-point scale where 5 means that the economy would get "a lot better" if Reagan were to be elected, 4 means "a little better," 3 stands for "stay the same," 2 means "a little worse," and 1 means "a lot worse." The same scale resulted from an identical question about the outcome if Mondale were elected. These were combined to form a scale where 1 indicates a belief that the economy will get a lot better if Mondale is elected and a lot worse if Reagan is elected. A 9 on the scale indicates the belief that the economy will get a lot better if Reagan is elected and a lot worse if Mondale is elected. A score of 5 indicates equality in the beliefs about the candidates, whether it is much better for both or much worse for both. Thus, a high score indicates favorableness toward Ronald Reagan and unfavorableness toward Walter Mondale. A low score means

the opposite. This variable is referred to as the candidate-economy perception.

The economic pessimism index is the sum of responses to four questions which ask whether the level of four economic indicators--inflation, unemployment, the budget deficit and the prime interest rate--were rising, falling or staying the same. These responses were coded to give the negative direction--unemployment, interest rates, and deficits and inflation all rising--a score of 3, the "staying same" response a score of 2 and the perception that all four indicators were falling a score of 1. "Don't Know" responses were coded as 0. The four questions were summed to create an "economic pessimism" index with a range of 0 to 12.

The economic knowledge index consists of questions concerning the actual levels of these four economic indicators, framed in a multiple choice format in which respondents were asked if the indicators were "closer to" one of four choices. Correct responses were given a code of 1, incorrect or "don't know" responses coded 0 and the four questions summed to create a five-point scale from 0 to 4.

There are four communications variables in the first stage of the model. Two are standard frequency-of-use questions: How many days in the past week did you read a newspaper (watch national evening news on television)? A news attention variable is constructed out of two more specific questions. One asks "How much attention do you pay to news about the current presidential campaign--a lot, some

a little or no attention?" Another question asks about "attention to news about the nation's economy" on the same scale. The results were summed to create a more general seven-point news attention index.

The final communication variable attempts to measure the respondents' general level of interpersonal communication about politics. It asks simply, "How often do you talk about national politics with other people--often, sometimes, rarely or never?"

Two variables relate directly to the respondent's party identification. One is a standard seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican with "not strong" and "closer to" categories in between. In addition, this scale is "folded" to create a four-point strength of party identification scale.

The remaining variables are standard demographics. Education is measured in years of school completed, with a possible range of 0 to 21 (Ph.D or professional degree). Age is measured in years. Income is measured with a six-category scale ranging from under $10,000 to more than $50,000.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, ranges and number of respondents for each of these variables. In addition, the sample is 42 percent male, 58 percent female, 80 percent white, 19 percent black and 1 percent other races. Table 2 shows the zero-order correlation coefficients among the variables.

Tables 1 and 2 About Here

Analysis

As noted above, there is an expectation that without party identification, communications variables may play a more important role in predicting candidate preference. the analysis that follows first tests the model shown in Figure 1, which includes both the party identification and the party strength scales. Then the sample is divided between those who indicated affiliation with a political party and those who subscribed to no party or would only describe themselves as "closer to" one or the other of the parties. While this division loses the difference between the strong and "not strong" party identifiers, it does result in two roughly equal subsamples, each with enough members to proceed with separate analyses in each subgroup. They are referred to from this point on as the partisan and nonpartisan groups.

A path analytic approach was taken in order to test the proposed models. As can be seen in Figure 1, the model proposes four stages. The economic knowledge variable is first regressed on the communication, political party and demographic variables. In the second stage, the economic pessimism scale is regressed on the same set of variables, with the addition of economic knowledge. In the next stage,

the candidate-economy perception variable is regressed on the variables that precede it in the model. Finally, candidate preference is regressed on the candidate-economy perception variable, the two economic system variables and the set of communication, political party and demographic variables.

This analysis makes the assumption that this is primarily a nonrecursive model, in that the direction of influence is assumed to flow predominantly from left to right through the model, rather than reciprocally. Such an assumption, if justifiable, vastly simplifies the analysis and interpretation of the results.

In the separate analyses for the two party affiliation groups, the party strength measure is removed, leaving a reduced version of the party identification as the only party-related variable. In other words, for the partisan model, the party variable has four values, the strong and not strong responses for both Democratic and Republican parties. For the nonpartisan model, the party variable has three values, the "closer to" responses for both parties and the middle-of-the road response.

Results

Figure 2 shows the outcome for the model with the entire sample and including strength of party identification as a variable. Standardized betas are shown if they are significant at the 0.10 level or better. The total model

succeeds in predicting 77 percent of the variance in candidate preference (multiple r = 0.88; adjusted R square = 0.77)

Figure 2 About Here

In the first equation, with economic knowledge as the dependent variable, the communications variables turned out to be fairly strong predictors. News media attention and political discussion are both positive predictors while television news watching is a negative predictor. These four variables account for 16 percent of the variance in economic knowledge (multiple r = 0.43; adjusted R square = 0.16).

The variables in this equation explain only 4 percent of the variance in economic pessimism (multiple r = 0.28; adjusted R square = 0.04), this accounted for by a small negative relationship with age, and by a positive association with affiliation with the Democratic party on the party identification scale. Economic pessimism is not predicted significantly by the communications variables or by economic knowledge.

The model is much more successful in predicting the candidate-economy perception variable. Forty-five percent of the variance in expectations for the economy (multiple r = 0.69; adjusted R square = 0.45) is accounted for by four variables. Economic knowledge predicts a favorable

expectation for Reagan. Party identification is strongly and negatively associated with expectations for the economy. This means that Democratically affiliated respondents were likely to have negative expectations from a Reagan victory. There is a small negative relationship with strength of party identification, in other words, the stronger the party identification, the more positive a Mondale outcome is seen. Economic pessimism shows a small negative association as well, with pessimism declining as favorableness toward Reagan increases.

Finally, the dependent variable, candidate preference, which is scaled so that a high value represents firm preference for Mondale, is predicted directly by five variables. By far the strongest is party identification, with Democratic affiliation predicting support for Mondale, as would be expected. Strength of party identification is also an important predictor, with stronger affiliation predicting support for Mondale. The candidate-economy perception concerning the election outcome is also very strongly predictive of the candidate preference. A favorableness toward Reagan on this factor is strongly and negatively related to a preference for Mondale.

To summarize, party variables and the economic perceptions--economic pessimism and perception of the election outcome on the economy--all directly predict candidate preference. The effect of communications variables is in predicting economic knowledge, which is rather weakly related to candidate-economy perception.

Comparisons by Strength of Party Identification

Figures 3 and 4 look at the same set of analyses, but separately for those who affiliate themselves with a political party and those who do so very weakly or not at all. There are some notable differences between the two analyses, although their interpretation remains problematic.

Obviously, party identification plays a much more important role in Figure 4, the partisan group, than it does in Figure 3, which shows the model among the nonpartisan respondents. The model accounts for 86 percent of the variance in candidate preference among the partisan group compared to 59 percent in the nonpartisan group.

Figures 3 and 4 About Here

Also, different communications variables operate differently in the two subsamples. Among the nonpartisans, television news watching, news attention and political discussion and education all predict economic knowledge, but this is a path analytical cul-de-sac. Economic knowledge predicts nothing else in the model. Figure 4, however, shows that among the partisans news attention predicts knowledge, which then predicts the candidate-economy perception.

Among nonpartisans, the television news and newspaper reading variables also directly predict the candidate-economy perception, and in a negative direction.

This means that the more frequent the use of these media, the less favorable the respondent is toward Ronald Reagan.

In addition, the paths between the candidate-economy perception and candidate preference, while both negative, are very different in their magnitudes. This path is much stronger among the nonpartisan respondents than among the partisan respondents.

To summarize, it seems that among the stronger party identifiers, there is some evidence that news attention affects knowledge, which predicts candidate-economy perception, which then predicts candidate preference. Among the weaker party identifiers, knowledge is predicted by several communications variables, but itself plays no further role. On the other hand, two communications variables directly predict the candidate-economy perception, which itself very strongly predicts candidate preference.

Discussion

Recent models of news media influence in elections have denied the media a direct role in determining candidate choice. Instead, an indirect role has been specified in which the media are thought to supply the information, perceptions, images and context to which voters add their own social, psychological, economic and political interpretations to arrive at the vote.

The decisional process is complex, to some extent idiosyncratic and by no means strictly unidirectional. As many researchers have shown, not only does information have implications for decisions and actions, but deciding or acting determines much about the information that is perceived and the conclusions drawn from that information. (See Manheim, 1975, pp. 72-90 for a concise review of this issue).

With this as context, it is possible to examine the results of this study in terms of how they relate to an overall political decision-making process. What seems most striking is the continued importance of political party identification. Despite reports to the contrary, there does seem to be life in the old construct yet. In fact, it seems to come close to overwhelming the other variables in the model. As expected, it strongly predicts candidate choice, but it also predicts perceptions of economic trends, measured here as economic pessimism. It also relates very strongly to perceptions of what the election would mean for the general economy.

All the analyses here, both with the full sample and the subsamples based on strength of party identification, also seem to provide evidence in favor of an indirect role in candidate preference for the news media. Media variables predict knowledge or perceptions or both; these then predict the candidate-economy perception, which is strongly predictive of the candidate choice. It is interesting to

note the consistently negative betas between television news viewing and economic knowledge, while the news attention measure is consistently positive.

This indirect role of the news media was expected to be more evident among respondents with weaker party identification. This seems to be the case here, although the interpretation must remain tentative since none of the betas is particularly large.

First, among the nonpartisans, the candidate-economy perception is a far more important predictor of the candidate choice (standardized beta = -0.57) than it is among the stronger partisans (standardized beta = -0.29). Thus, this relevant perception is itself much more important among the nonpartisan. It would follow that any factor that predicts it among this group would itself assume an important role. And among these people, both frequency of television news use and newspaper reading directly predict this important perception (although the beta between television news use and this perception is significant at 0.10 level).

Among partisan respondents, except for a weak, negative and direct link from newspaper reading to candidate preference (more newspaper reading predicts support for Reagan), the only other impact of communications factors is news attention on economic knowledge. This significantly predicts candidate-economy perception, which is then linked to candidate preference.

What is also striking about nonpartisans is the absolute lack of role played by knowledge in the model, in this case more or less factual, "objective" economic knowledge, compared to its role among the partisans. In addition, the direct links to the important perceptions from the media, if confirmed in other studies on other samples, would tend to confirm the importance that has been given by campaigns and the media to "image" politics, and relative disregard for the informational content of campaigns such as issue positions, experience and leadership qualities (Patterson, 1980; Joslyn, 1984).

The fact that these simple exposure variables do not positively predict knowledge (but television news exposure does have a negative association with knowledge), but do have an impact on perceptions might point to an effect of relative inattentive and uninterested use of the media. On the other hand the role of news attention in predicting knowledge points to a different role for interested and attentive use of the media. It seems that, as has been pointed out elsewhere, simple exposure to the media and actual informational use are two very distinct occurrences.

The relationships here are not as strong or as clear as would be desired to allow full acceptance of the mass media as "functional equivalents" to political parties in the electoral process. For one thing, the nonpartisan model is much less successful in predicting candidate preference than

the partisan model. So media and other variables, while demonstrating some impact, do not simply "take over" for party identification.

However, party identification is a global concept with ramifications for large portions of a belief system. Economic perceptions are no doubt of less importance, and there are many other perceptions that are potentially important. Inclusion of perceptions of specific issue positions, leadership abilities, foreign policy impact and a host of others would likely begin to flesh out the model.

Some of these would likely be more closely related than others to communications factors. The results of this study might predict that those that are more "image-like" might be predicted by inattentive and "inadvertant" media exposure. Those that are closer to knowledge, such as specific issue positions and knowledge about past experience, might be predicted by attentive and purposeful media use. This study does not address these issues. But before a clear picture of media effects on candidate choice can be drawn, it seems that clear delineations must be made among the various kinds of perceptions that may occur in a political context, with the potential for different antecedents and effects of each.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Number of Respondents and Observed Ranges for Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Observed Range
Income[1]	3.37	1.41	278	1 - 6
Age	42.54	16.32	310	18 - 85
Education	14.29	2.75	312	2 - 21
Party ID[2]	3.75	1.91	293	1 - 7
Party Strength	2.61	1.06	293	1 - 4
News Attention	6.54	1.37	322	2 - 8
TV News Watching	4.54	2.44	324	0 - 7
Newspaper Reading	5.33	2.39	324	0 - 7
Political Discussion	2.89	0.86	321	1 - 4
Economic Knowledge	1.67	1.15	324	0 - 4
Economic Pessimism	7.29	2.20	313	0 - 12
Candidate-Economy Perception[3]	5.87	1.96	275	1 - 9
Candidate Preference[4]	2.69	2.44	306	1 - 7

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[1] 1 = under $10,000; 6 = more than $50,000

[2] 1 = strong Republican; 7 = strong Democrat

[3] 1 = economy much better if Mondale elected, much worse if Reagan elected;
9 = economy much better if Reagan elected, much worse if Mondale elected

[4] 1 = very sure for Reagan; 7 = very sure Mondale

Table 2

Zero-Order Pearson Correlations

$^{a}p \leq 0.05$ $^{b}p \leq 0.01$ $^{c}p \leq 0.001$	Age	Education	Party ID	Party Strength	News Attention	TV News Watching	Newspaper Reading	Political Disucssion	Economic Knowledge	Economic Pessimism	Candidate-Economy Perception	Candidate Preference
Income	$-.13^{b}$ (277)	$.44^{c}$ (277)	$-.19^{c}$ (262)	-.03 (262)	$.15^{b}$ (278)	$.14^{b}$ (278)	$.11^{a}$ (278)	$.13^{b}$ (276)	$.20^{c}$ (278)	-.08 (271)	$.23^{c}$ (244)	$-.23^{c}$ (264)
Age		$-.19^{c}$ (308)	$-.12^{a}$ (287)	$.10^{a}$ (287)	.09 (308)	$.34^{c}$ (310)	$.24^{c}$ (310)	.07 (307)	$-.12^{a}$ (310)	-.09 (300)	.08 (265)	$-.11^{a}$ (293)
Education			-.02 (290)	-.05 (290)	$.15^{b}$ (310)	.03 (312)	$.14^{b}$ (312)	$.18^{c}$ (309)	$.18^{c}$ (312)	.03 (302)	.09 (266)	-.08 (295)
Party ID				-.03 (293)	$-.16^{b}$ (292)	-.06 (293)	.02 (293)	$-.17^{b}$ (290)	$-.18^{c}$ (293)	$.24^{c}$ (282)	$-.66^{c}$ (254)	$.74^{c}$ (279)
Party Strength					$.11^{a}$ (292)	$.15^{b}$ (293)	.05 (293)	.06 (290)	.05 (293)	.02 (282)	-.10 (254)	$.22^{c}$ (279)
News Attention						$.26^{c}$ (322)	$.15^{b}$ (322)	$.41^{c}$ (319)	$.26^{c}$ (322)	.00 (311)	$.14^{b}$ (273)	$-.13^{b}$ (304)
TV News Watching							$.22^{c}$ (324)	$.17^{c}$ (321)	-.06 (324)	.04 (313)	-.03 (275)	.03 (306)
Newspaper Reading								.07 (321)	-.02 (324)	.01 (313)	-.00 (275)	.03 (306)
Political Discussion									$.28^{c}$ (321)	.08 (312)	$.12^{a}$ (274)	$-.17^{c}$ (304)
Economic Knowledge										.07 (313)	$.27^{c}$ (275)	$-.21^{c}$ (306)
Economic Pessimism											$-.28^{c}$ (266)	$.34^{c}$ (296)
Candidate-Economy Perception												$-.77^{c}$ (260)

Figure 1

Predictive Model of Candidate Preference

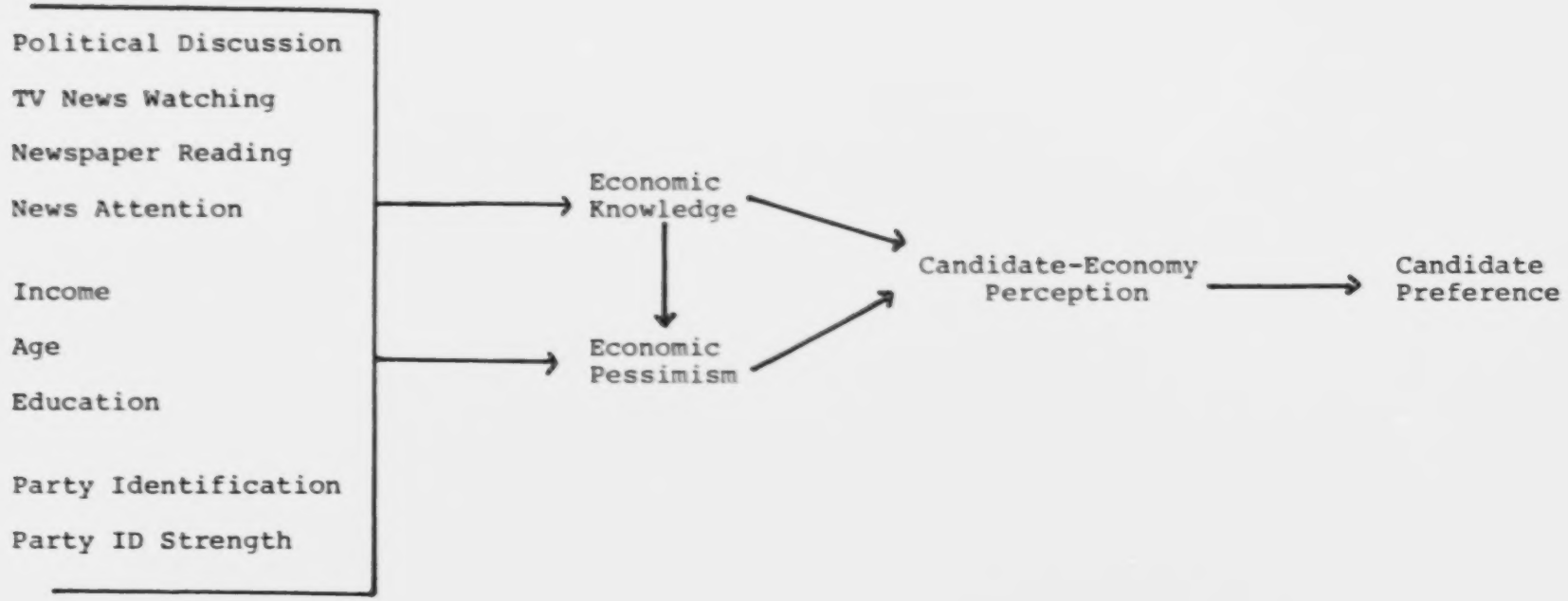

Figure 2

Path Analytical Model Predicting Candidate Preference--Standardized Betas
(Total Sample; Total Model N = 213)

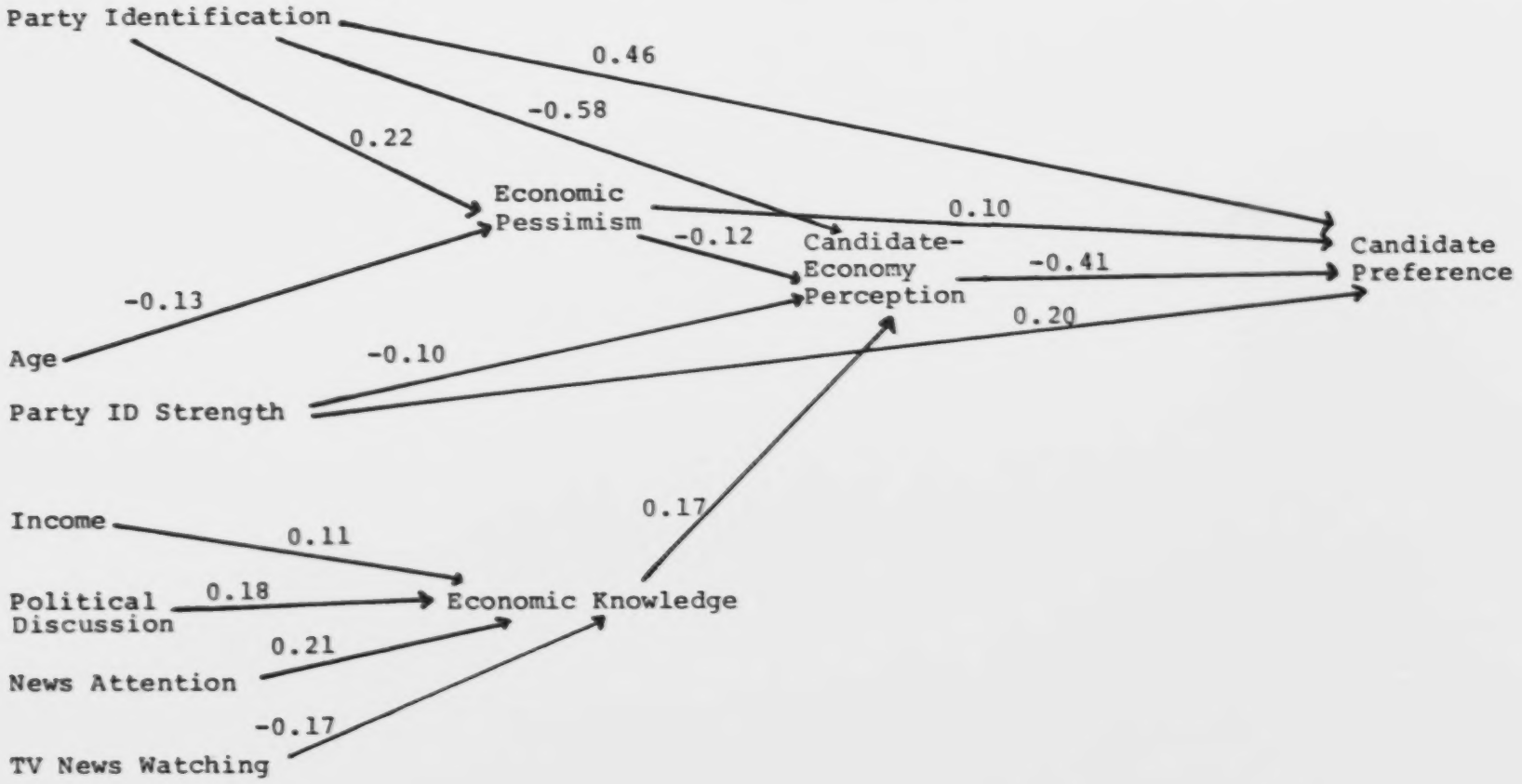

Figure 3

Path Analytical Model Predicting Candidate Preference--Standardized Betas
(Nonpartisan Subsample; Total Model N = 103)

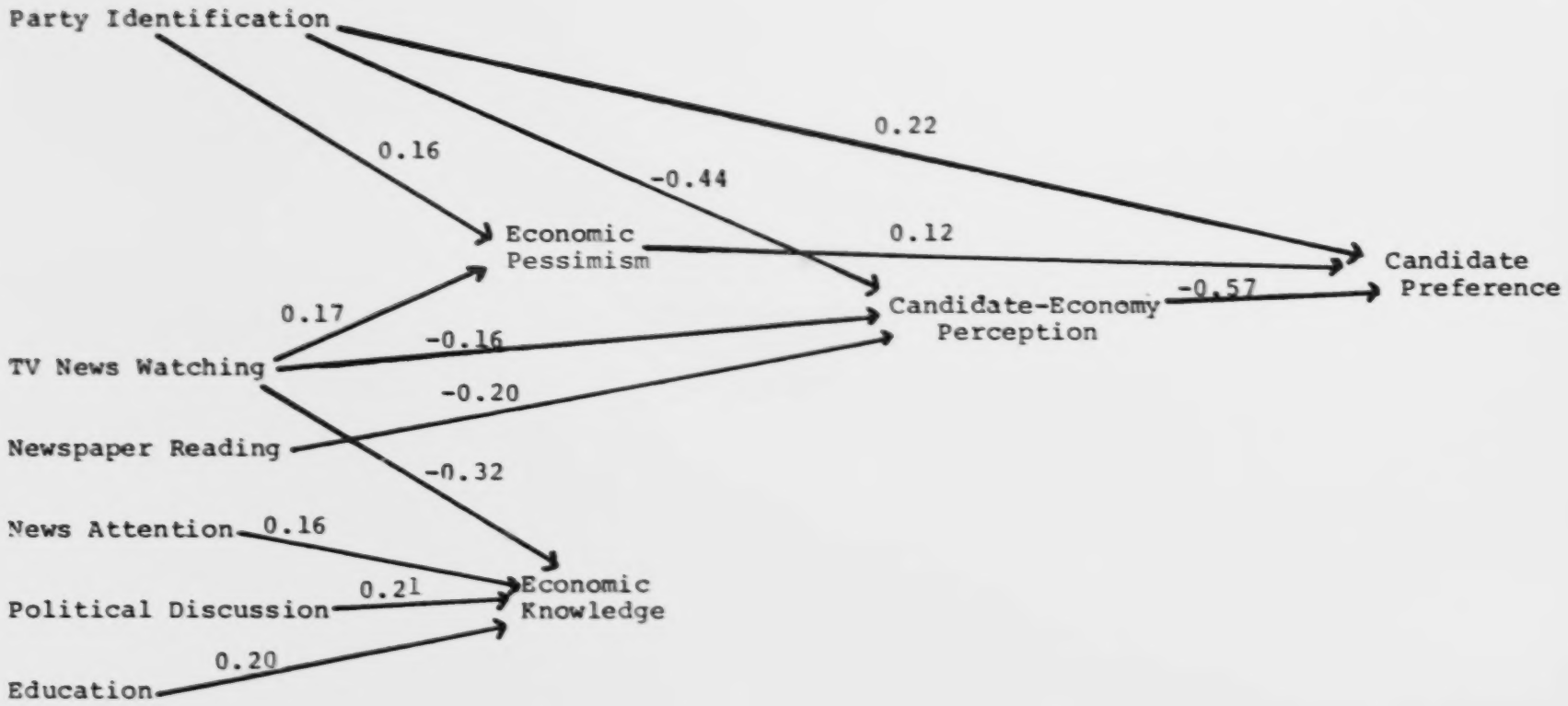

Figure 4

Path Analytical Model Predicting Candidate Preference
(Partisan Subsample; Total Model N = 110)